

# **The Big Thicket: A Bold Opportunity for East Texas**

*By U.S. Congressman Kevin Brady*

Generations of east and southeast Texans have looked to the Big Thicket for their livelihoods, homesteads and recreation. Early settlers depended on the natural resources it provided for their survival and loggers of the 1800's created a vibrant industry employing thousands. How many families, their children and grandchildren have enjoyed its abundant hunting, fishing and wildlife?

Today as local leaders in East Texas search for a new sustainable economy - one that can create good jobs for our children and generate reliable new tax revenues for our communities - the Big Thicket may again provide a bold new opportunity.

The Big Thicket National Preserve is renowned as an ecological treasure. With the right vision and support it can be even more: one of the premier eco-tourism destinations in the southern United States.

After three years of work and collaboration, I recently introduced legislation in Congress, H.R. 5891, to connect, preserve and revitalize the Big Thicket in a way that protects its scientific value and grows the local economy while protecting private property rights.

The current sell-off of major timber lands provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to thoughtfully connect the Preserve's 15 land and water units. Linking these together will better protect the Thicket's ecological value and simultaneously make it a more attractive eco-tourism site.

Working together in a regional partnership, why can't we position the Big Thicket at the center of a dynamic new tourism economy for our region? Eco-tourism is a fast growing segment of the travel industry. Outdoor recreation ranks as the third most popular travel activity for Americans.

Look at the potential. The Big Thicket is visited by 100,000 visitors a year with an economic impact of just \$6 million a year, mostly from day trips. With a united vision and hard work I am convinced our region can attract a million visitors a year. By creating a regional eco-tourism destination that ties together new and existing visitor attractions, we can target tourists who will stay for three to five days. Thinking bigger about the Big Thicket, our region is capable of capturing the full economic potential of our recreational assets and fostering new appreciation for our ecological heritage. Destination tourists would take home life-long memories while leaving behind their welcomed dollars.

To start this ball rolling, HR 5891 funds several family friendly eco-tourism attractions including a canopy walk among the tree tops, elevated boardwalks and several GPS guided canoe and kayak trails located throughout the Preserve. To attract visitors traveling the busy I-10 corridor, a new interpretive center near Beaumont would serve as a magnet to draw tourists into east and southeast Texas.

These family visitor enhancements should just be the beginning. Communities near the Preserve can choose to creatively develop their own Thicket-related tourism attractions. This will create several “front gates” to the Big Thicket while offering families multiple reasons to spend their vacation dollars enjoying our lakes, rivers, museums, festivals and antique centers.

As a strong believer in private property rights, I ensured this legislation includes clear safeguards for land owners. The National Park Service can only accept or purchase land that is donated or sold voluntarily by willing sellers. Plus, every land owner can “opt out” of the expansion area by a simple letter, no questions asked, by a simple letter. No eminent domain authority is permitted.

Over time, the Big Thicket could grow by up to 100,000 acres. The proposed expansion focuses on land critical to the Preserve’s ecological future but which minimize local impacts. For example, 70,000 acres lie within the floodplain and are not easily developable. Other parcels have already been identified for conservation purposes by timber companies in prior sales.

But all plans can be improved and modified. I am reaching out to communities, leaders and interested landowners to solicit their input and adjust accordingly. I am open, flexible and determined to create a model plan that our region can embrace.

Public support and involvement is critical. We have a bold opportunity to join together to preserve our heritage and create a new economy with our region’s remarkable natural assets as the centerpiece.

There are no guarantees. But if our region’s government, business, tourism and conservation leaders unite - and work hard to make it a reality - we have a unique chance to create a brighter future for our region.

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*U.S. Congressman Kevin Brady represents the 8<sup>th</sup> District of Texas. Over the past three years he has secured federal resources to nearly -complete the Preserve boundaries authorized by Congress in the 1993 legislation by Rep. Charles Wilson and Sen. Phil Gramm.*